DARK AND SATANIC.
WORK LIFE IN VICTORIA’S WOOLLEN MILLS
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You see woollen mills as you drive through Geelong, or Abbotsford or Ballarat, or pass the outskirts of half a dozen country towns. They are cryptic looking places, red brick or stone boxes near the creek or the railway line, with few doors and no side windows, visible in silhouette as a saw toothed roof line and a great silent chimney stack. The sort of places you naturally think of in terms of child labour, sweated females and tyrannical management. Dark and Satanic in fact.

This short paper will tell you a little about woollen mills in Victoria in the early 20th century. About the size and shape of the industry first of all, then how the people of the industry made sense of factory life by creating and maintaining a family model at work. I hope by the end of this paper you will share my doubts about “dark and satanic”.

INTRODUCTION TO THE INDUSTRY

Victoria was the centre of the Australian woollen industry. Here in 1900 there were nine mills; three in Melbourne, three in Geelong, two in Ballarat and one in Castlemaine. They were, with the exception of Ballarat’s Sunnyside mill, woollen system mills processing the shorter and courser wools rather than the longer and finer fibres used in the more intricate worsted system.

They made an enormous range of goods, all the many textiles that an isolated, developing country needed for daily life. Initially they produced simple woollens; woven shawls, coarse tweeds, thick flannels and woollen blankets, but as the country grew so did the demands for variety. By 1919 the mills were offering pure wool and cotton blend blankets in grey or white and ten grades of flannel; lightweights for baby wear and the long and short wool underwear worn by both sexes, medium grades for dresses, heavy weights for shearer’s and iron founder’s shirts and the racy coloured blazers of the sportsman. The mills made light weight tweeds for women’s dresses and costumes, heavier weights for men’s trousers, and blue serge for Sunday best suits. They made wool gabardine for the working man’s waistcoat, wool cords for stockmen’s britches and cavalry jodhpurs, and finally, for Australia’s hundreds of thousands of work horses, they made the specialized collar checks and kerseys used to line harness and saddles.

Textiles was an essential industry at this stage of Australia’s development and the new State and Federal governments were quick to recog-
nize this. Official endorsement in the form of protective tariffs from 1908, local preference in government tenders and the ANA initiated "Made in Australia" campaign started in 1906 created conditions so favourable to marketing that new mills were quickly built. A great boom in mill building between 1915 and 1925 resulted, much of it financed by British investment in worsted capacity. By the late twenties, when Australian mills finally took control of their home market, there were 28 mills operating in the state. 1

The mills were built by two groups of investors for significantly different reasons. In Geelong and Melbourne private families generating their own capital dominated the ownership and management of the older mills; the Grays, Collinses and Hirsts ran Geelong and the Gibsons, Gaunts and Laycocks ran Melbourne. In the country towns, especially the old gold towns where civic economies were being drained by the flow of population to Melbourne, the mills were established by committees of local businessmen as public companies owned by legions of district shareholders. The Ballarat mill was 84% owned by local people in 1900 and the Warrnambool mill, opened on 1909, 94%. Later mills of the 1920s in Stawell, Wangaratta, Sale, and Daylesford were similarly local concerns.

Why was it that these towns and families chose to invest their capital in a woollen mill rather than in one of the new industries like light electrical or rubber? Certainly they all expected to make profits, for apart from the profitability was generally high and reached 14% in the immediate post-war years. But capital costs were equally high. Mills required the biggest engines of any secondary industry to power them and these engines ran some of the most sophisticated and expensive machinery in general use. Almost every piece of equipment in them had to be imported from England. To finance a mill was an enormous undertaking, yet in the post-war years mill building was a favoured option of many quite small towns.

In part, government encouragement of the industry helped. In part the decision was made in the expectation that the mill would utilize local resources like timber fuel, pure water and greasy wool, but mostly the decision seems to have been made on supernatural grounds. The towns needed a miracle and so they chose the biggest and most modern miracle they could think of.

A mill was a miraculous place to people whose only acquaintance with industry had been the local butter factory or mine. Even blase city folk were mesmerized by the spectacle of a mill going full blast, and excusion - loads of tourists became such a nuisance at Ballarat in 1906 that the mill employees demanded that they be refused admittance. As late as 1926 Foy and Gibson was running popular bus tours of its two miles of mills in Collingwood.

Because the mills were the creation of their towns, because they were public companies with responsibilities to local shareholders and local employees, and because also they made substantial profits, management in them was characterized by a more interactive, benevolent style than British mills. While Australian mills retained the forms of the patriarchal work family inherited from Britain, they did not inherit many of its great disadvantages. The mills here were purpose-built by proud towns and families. They were built to be architecturally and functionally superior - bright, spacious and, for their times, modern. Because they were built on the peripheries of existing towns rather than acting as the nucleus for the growth of a company town, they never developed company stores or dormitory housing and the social tyrannies which went with them. Here the mill was a source of civic pride rather than a symbol of oppression.

**THE MILL FAMILY.**

The differences between English and Australian mills were particularly apparent to people who had worked in both. People like Margaret Gelling, who wrote this letter in 1925 to John Maclellan, the managing director of Foy and Gibson:

Dear sir

I have often thought of writing to you to thank you for the many acts of kindness to your work people. It is over three years since I left the weaving mill on account of sickness (I am in domestic service now) but I can never forget your kind interest for the welfare of your workers. May God bless you and give you health and strength and long life to see the fruits of your labours. I still keep in touch with the mill girls some that left to be married and we talk about the good old times.... You see I came from Lancashire 14 years ago on my own as I have no relatives in the world and masters are not the same at home as they are in Australia.... Please accept this grateful letter from one who tried to understand and appreciate your many acts of kindness. Yours sincerely....2
This letter certainly illustrates the welfare-oriented management style of Australian managers, but its principal interest lies in its strong evocation of a sense of family. Years after she left the mill, Margaret Gelling “kept in touch” with work mates, to talk about the “good old times” and recreate the sense of belonging which she found in the mill but not in domestic service.

The family model as it existed in the mills was of the standard patriarchal type of most 19th century businesses. It consisted of manager, men and girls. The manager was the father, the foremen and leading hands were the eldest sons and the other men and boys the younger sons. All females, irrespective of age or marital status were girls, and daughters of the work family. There was no mother, for although the manager’s wife might administer first aid or present the prizes at the mill picnic, she did not work in the factory and so existed outside its social structures.

Mill families presented themselves clearest of all in photographs, either as individual groups or as a full family, posed in front of the mill building. In mill photos between 1874 and 1930, mill people were specially posed outside their mill in presentations of family still used today in school, church and family photography. Two things stand out in these images; the domesticity they evoke in the way they place of the father/manager in the centre of the shot and the children at the front, and their implications of strong notions of propriety in the way the sexes are grouped apart. Like school photos they convey to the audience a strong sense of stability, security and rectitude.

The segregated nature of work family life and the differing roles of the sexes showed up very clearly in the jobs each family group did in the mill. Only men could do certain jobs, only women others and the children of both sexes were assigned others again. In the mills this division of labour was to some extent traditional, but it was certainly reinforced by the community and domestic norms written into the Factories and Shops Acts after 1873. Girls were deliberately protected from unhealthy, wet, heavy and dangerous work as boys were not. Boys were honorary men at 14 but girls stayed girls even into their 60s.

Mill men did the highly skilled jobs and the heavy, dirty, wet or dangerous work around the mill. Men ran the wool sorting, washing, blending and carding rooms, did mule spinning, worked in the dyehouse, the wet and dry fabric finishing departments and the warehouse. They ran the power house, engineering workshop and comprised the majority of the managerial and clerical employees. Boys usually started in the mill as bobbin boys, delivering full and empty bobbins to the weavers, while the lucky ones became assistants, “piecers” to the mule spinners.

The women whose skills were best rewarded in these years were the ladies in the office and the warpers, worsted weavers and menders. The more apt among the young females would be taught weaving and in time be promoted to their own looms, but many of the girls who started work doing empty bobbins off spinning frames would progress no further than tending process machinery like combs, rovers, spinning and doubling frames.

The mill family had its geographical as well as its occupational expressions. The manager’s house was built on mill grounds, as close as possible to the work place in the earlier mills like Ballarat and within a couple of streets in the mills of the twenties, a locational statement about his central cultural importance to the mill. The employees too lived very close and mill neighbourhoods grew up around the Geelong, Abbotsford and Ballarat mills particularly. At Ballarat in 1900 84% of employees lived in cottages within 2 km and 38% of these lived in the six streets closest to the mill.

The work family model was also manifested in the mill buildings proper. Between 1906 and 1925 when profits were good, many of Victoria’s secondary industries, especially those which employed large numbers of women, undertook elaborate employee welfare schemes. In the mills, this was expressed in a range of buildings, beginning with the Alfred Mills employees’ recreation centre and roller skating rink and the Ballarat Mill’s women’s dining room of 1906, but going on to include a variety of other innovations along domestic themes such as formal entrance halls, elaborate dining and board rooms, and flower gardens.

Historic Environment VIII 3&4 (1991)
These physical evocations of family were underpinned by elaborate codes of “proper” behavior inside the mill buildings. Each component of the mill family had its established duties and rights. The manager had fatherly duties; to arbitrate on moral issues, hear appeals for justice, administer punishment if necessary and to intercede with outside authorities on behalf of family members if requested. Employees had dependant’s duties; to attend punctually, work consistently and to respect the family’s institutions.

In return for being hard working, punctual and respectful, employees were entitled to a surprising range of rights, and mill correspondence shows them exercising these extensively. Parents of younger employees often wrote asking the manager to perform fatherly duties.

Mill boy, Willy Kelly reported losing his pay packet on the way home from work, and his father asked John Ashley, the manager of the Ballarat Mills to find it. “PS” he wrote, “he always brings his pay home unopened.”

Dear Mr Kelly, [Ashley replied]

I have put up a notice about the money.... I want to tell you however, that [Willy] paid Hector Holmes 2/- and Copperwaite 10/- before he started off... I do not think he always brings his pay home without being opened. He tells me that the envelope will stick quite easily after being opened once. Yours faithfully. 3

Kelly senior had had no hesitation in asking the manager of one of the largest public companies in the state to assist one of its most junior of his employees, and Ashley had none in acceding; they both knew that was what fathers did.

Employees could delegate a considerable amount of fatherly authority to the manager. The soldier father of a weaver girl wrote to John Ashley in 1917 in these terms:

Tell the boss who is in charge of her that if he hears her using bad language or doing anything he thinks is not right to get her and twist her ear for her. She will not be game to tell her mother the Mother will know there is something wrong then and give her another thrashing. He can take it from me there will be nothing said by me for doing such things.... Be very firm with her .... 4

said the sergeant, signing off.

Employees in trouble with outside officialdom acquired an important ally in the person of the manager. Managers wrote hundreds of references for employees and their families. They appeared in court as character witnesses. They organized accommodation and pensions for mothers of employees killed in the war. They gave financial advice on savings and insurance and went to battle for employees short-changed by worker’s compensation insurers. They arranged hospital admission and fee payment for destitute ex-employees and sponsored scores of masonic, church and civic hopefuls.

The mill family worked because it benefitted all its members. The manager got the smooth production runs essential to assembly - line work, and the employees got a variety of services unobtainable to them outside the mill and also a job which paid the highest base wage of any board trade; employment close to home, where one could work with neighbours and relatives; the services of the manager in legal or economic matters; company amenities such as canteens and sportsgrounds, the right to buy at cost top quality yarn, blankets or fabric for family and friends, and, not least, a varied social life with friends of the same age. Mill groups formed cricket, football, baseball and gym teams, and companies.
Yarra Falls' Mill picnic, 1923  

La Trobe Collection
sponsored choirs, orchestras, social nights and the lavish annual picnic. The family which played together stayed together.

Apart from the extent of its benefits to the mill family, what kept this version of benevolent paternalism going for as long as it did, say 1868 to 1928, was a most basic right of employees; the right to speak to the manager face-to-face and to negotiate with him direct. Until 1926, when the first federal award legitimized the Textile Worker’s Union’s role in arbitration, official disputes in the industry were non-existent. Before this time, grievances were aired and requests made by deputations of employees calling on the manager. This defused disputes before they became serious. In the words of Arthur Farnsworth, the 1928 president of the Geelong branch of the TWU:

[I have] been president of the Geelong branch for thirteen years and in that time [the branch] has never taken a case before a union meeting. They were all settled amicably with the management. 5

So pervasive was the practice of this sort of paternalism that the union before 1926 was left with no role to play in welfare or industrial disputes. While it did provide nominations for the wages board panels, the hostility towards unions in the older privately-owned mills was so intense that the union could not flourish. The manager-fathers ran their mills alone and would suffer no competition. Even today a vastly widened membership has failed to eradicate the perceived shared interests of union and mill management, a conservatism that led Communists in the 1950s to castigate ATWU officials as “bosses crawlers”.

CONCLUSIONS

The presentations of the work family are everywhere in the wool textile industry before 1930; in the wording of the Articles of Association of the companies which operated them, and in the wording of the share certificates they issued; in the jobs done by the sexes in their different age groups, and the varying wages they were paid for the work; in the posing of photographic images of mill employees; in the recreation rooms, gardens, sportsgrounds, dining and locker rooms built in mills between 1906 and 1925 and in the suites of proper behaviors developed to regulate social relationships at work.

Work family was a much more complicated entity than a straightforward instrument of capitalist oppression, too much a joint creation of mill people for it to be totally dark and satanic. During these thirty years workers continued to seek jobs for their families in the mill even when other employment was freely available. They continued to make extensive use of the manager’s services and in general remained disinclined to join the union. They apparently preferred the status quo and worked to maintain it.

Why then did the model fade away after the twenties?

One reason might have been the high mortality rate of its practitioners, John Ashley and his predecessor at Ballarat both dropped dead at work in the mill following histories of stress-related illnesses. Managers who were conscientious patriarchs could literally work themselves to death being all things to all family people.
The growth of external social services must also have helped, but the success of the industry was, I think, the main cause. By the late twenties employment had risen enormously and some mills now employed over 400 people. The direct, daily contact between manager and employees was lost in a proliferation of middle management; works managers, assistant foremen, leading hands, union reps. Without personal contact and the responsibilities it created, the reciprocal rights and duties of the benevolent patriarchy could not be constantly recreated and so maintained, and the old balance eroded away into a harsher, more impersonal regime. More and more the mill became just another place to work.

Endnotes
1 The bulk of the material used in this paper derives from Worrall, A "All Wool and a Yard Wide. The Victorian Wool Textile Industry 1900-1930." 1988, PhD, Melbourne University.
2 Letter of 13.9.1925, Foy and Gibson papers, Melbourne University Archives.
3 Letter of 23.5.1923, Ballarat Woollen and Worsted Co Pty Ltd. papers, Melbourne University Archives.
4 Letter of 6.12.1917, BWW papers, MUA.
5 Australian Textile Worker’s Union papers, 11/17-27, MUA.

Illustrations
1 Industrial Australian, 16/2/1922
2 Table Talk, February 1923
3 Industrial Australian, 22/7/1920